

*The greatest wonder is that we can see these trees and not wonder more.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Virginia's forests are extremely diverse and important in cleansing air, purifying water, providing products and supporting outdoor recreation. Forests also provide important habitat and serve as wildlife corridors for the movement of terrestrial animals and maintenance of species biodiversity. Of the Commonwealth's 15.8 million forested acres, 77 percent are in private ownership. It is estimated that 26,100 acres of Virginia's forests are converted to non-forest uses each year.

While the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) manages almost 50,000 acres of state forest land, Virginia's forests are predominantly privately owned. These working forests provide forest products, wildlife habitat, water quality protection, recreation opportunities and aesthetic benefits needed to sustain Virginia's ecological balance, as well as a healthy quality of life. Conservation of Virginia's working forest lands as a part of the Commonwealth's green infrastructure is essential.

## Findings

- Urban and suburban sprawl areas are causing significant loss of Virginia's commercial forest lands.
- With 15.77 million acres of forested land, Virginia is 61.5 percent forested. According to DOF, from 2001 to 2004, urban growth and development resulted in an average net loss of 26,100 acres per year. This is an accelerated rate of loss when compared to the 20,000 acres per year estimate for the 1992 to 2001 time period. More acres of forest are developed each year, but reversion of some agricultural land to forest partially offsets the loss. If current development trends continue, it has been projected that Virginia will lose a million acres of forest in the next 25 years.
- Growing fragmentation of forest cover due to an increased number of landowners and pressure from population is associated with the loss of total acreage. The transition from rural to urban forests occurs when the population rises from 20 to 70 people per square mile.



Niday State Forest on John's Creek Mountain in Craig County. Photo by DOF.



Conway Robinson State Forest in Manassas. Photo by DOF.

- Small woodlot management is becoming increasingly important as it allows forest management activities on smaller acreages.
- The loss of forest land has an adverse impact on timber related economy, but the economic impact of forest loss in terms of ecosystem values, such as clean water and air, is of equal concern.

## Recommendations

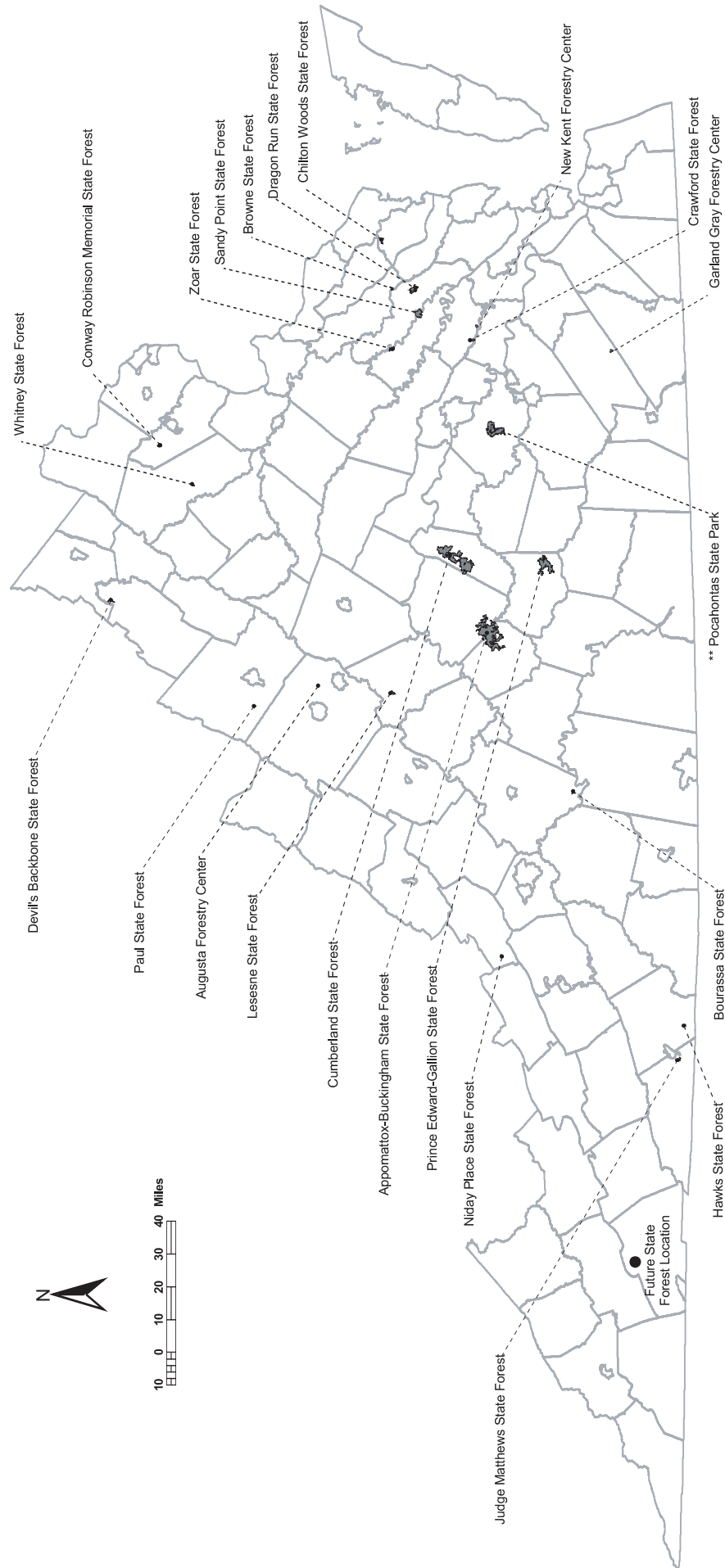
DOF should:

- Continue to educate Virginians about the importance of land conservation, green infrastructure and natural resource stewardship related to maintaining forested resources important to the Commonwealth's environment and economy.
- Encourage a green infrastructure approach to land protection and management by providing training in these concepts.
- Continue to emphasize best management practices and stewardship of forest land for properties adjoining the recreation systems identified in the 2007 Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP), such as Scenic Rivers, Virginia Byways, state natural area preserves and state parks.
- Coordinate with, and seek the assistance of, trail and river user organizations to develop forest trails and publish maps for each state forest as well link these trails with greenways.

- Continue to acquire inholdings and other properties to improve forest boundary lines, improve management and add environmentally diverse property to the state forest system.
- Initiate and maintain cooperative agreements to support the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Natural Heritage Program's natural resource database.
- Work with other natural resource agencies to promote good resource stewardship principles on state forest land and conduct citizen education and outreach activities on state-owned land.
- Promote urban forestry practices by stressing the importance of the urban canopy and assisting localities in making assessments and setting goals.

## Economics of Virginia's forests

Since 1607, Virginia forest resources have contributed to the state's economic prosperity. Virginia's forests provide a vital income source for rural areas and smaller cities. Based on the 2006 Virginia Forests: Our Commonwealth, the forest industry is worth \$25.2 billion in annual total economic output. This also includes "multiplier effect"-jobs and income created as forestry and forest product workers buy goods and services. The industry also generates 184,000 jobs, and landowners received \$276 million for timber stumpage, or the right to cut standing timber.



\*\* Deed held by the Department of Conservation and Recreation. 5,823 acres of the park are managed for multiple use forest by the Department of Forestry.

## State forest history

Virginia's State Forests system began in 1919 with a gift of 589 acres of land in Prince Edward County. In the mid-1930s, additional land was added as a result of federal government acquisitions under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. The majority of state forest land continues to be donated to the state by the federal government and private individuals. The original purpose of state forests was for public use, recreation, wildlife management and forest production to demonstrate good forest practices for private landowners, provide educational opportunities for the public, and establish and maintain long-term research efforts.

State forests are managed by DOF, which became a department-level agency in 1987. The forests system comprises 17 state forests consisting of 48,463 acres (see Map IX-5). In addition to managing the state's forests, DOF operates two tree nurseries that produce more than 34 million seedlings annually.

## Virginia Department of Forestry mission

The DOF mission is to "protect and develop healthy, sustainable forest resources for all Virginians". The DOF strategic plan, entitled *DOF 2014: Shaping Virginia's Forests*, names four land management goals for the agency as follows:

- Protect the citizens, their property and the forest resources from wildfire.

- Protect, promote and enhance forested watersheds, non-tidal wetlands and riparian areas.
- Conserve the forest landbase.
- Improve the stewardship, health and diversity of the forest resource.

DOF accomplishes these goals through work with private, non-industrial landowners, localities and other stakeholders. To conserve, manage and protect Virginia's forests, conservation organizations, such as land trusts and other non-government organizations, assist DOF with protection, conservation and management efforts.

DOF assists landowners with demonstrations of wetland practices, preparing forest stewardship plans, implementation of best management practices, hardwood improvement practices and other projects. An urban forestry program offers cities and smaller communities the expertise to maintain a forest canopy and take advantage of the environmental and aesthetic benefits provided by the tree cover. DOF is also the lead state agency for the conservation and restoration of riparian forest and other buffers in the Commonwealth.

DOF strives to educate Virginians about the importance of land conservation and natural resource stewardship. The agency's conservation education efforts are targeted to both youth and adults. In both cases, programs are delivered mainly by DOF staff at the local level.



New Kent Forestry Center near Providence Forge. Photo by DOF.

## State Forests

Adult outreach focuses on helping landowners maintain their land as a forested resource through management that is both environmentally sound and economically prudent. Programs include forestry tours, workshops and one-on-one planning. Youth education, using Project Learning Tree and other research based materials, reaches youth in schools, youth organizations and at community events.

State forests and other state lands provide excellent venues for place-based education or outdoor environmental education. DOF encourages outdoor recreation on state forests, recognizing that time spent outdoors develops a conservation ethic and stewardship behaviors. Forest education centers are being planned for DOF properties near Providence Forge and Galax. These centers will provide access to forest lands, self-guided learning opportunities and educator-led programs about forest resources.

### Existing state forests

The 17 state forests and two state nurseries help meet outdoor educational and recreational demands. The management of each state forest considers watershed protection, recreation, timber production, applied forest research programs, and wildlife and fisheries management. Although the focus of the state forest system is the practical application of sound forestry practices, a small portion of land has been set aside for purposes other than timber production. For example, some state forests support long-term research efforts including manipulation of the forest cover to study changes in water quality, studies on the re-introduction of the American chestnut and programs supporting natural resource stewardship.



*DOF staff prepare forest stewardship plans for property owners.  
Photo by Friends of Chesterfield's Riverfront.*

The majority of state forest acreage is in the central Piedmont region between Richmond and Lynchburg. Four of the largest state forests provide a resource base to the state parks located within them. These forest lands adjacent to state parks support camping, picnicking, interpretive programs and swimming facilities. Acquisition of additional units throughout Virginia is being considered. Existing areas are shown on map IX-4.

Natural areas designated in the forest system are used for environmental studies and management. The wildlife and fishery resources in state forests are managed with the assistance of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. This successful partnership affords Virginia's hunters, fishermen and nature lovers excellently-managed lands for outdoor recreation enjoyment.